

# Mahoning activists dream of new era for abused river

By JOHN C. KUEHNER  
PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

NILES — Charlie Scaggs loves his two-story home on the Mahoning River with its secluded, lush back yard shaded by towering maple and oak trees. Yet in the 48 years Scaggs has lived on the river, he, his wife and their four children have never so much as dipped a toe in the water.

"At times, it didn't even look like water," said the 76-year-old retired railroad conductor. "There were just streams of oil. It was just plain ugly."

Scaggs' family is one of only a few who live along the Mahoning's former industrial corridor. No one ever told them not to go into the water. Like most area residents, they just knew.

Along a 30-mile stretch from Warren to the Pennsylvania state line, no signs warn people of the deadly poisons that linger in the tarlike muck and in the river's bottom-feeding fish.

This is the legacy left by nearly a century of abuse. As many as 15 major steel plants spewed tons of chemicals, oils and solids into the river. In 1977, the U.S. Environmental

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Protection Agency found, among other things, that more than 70,000 pounds of oil and grease were released daily — enough oil to heat nearly 30,000 average homes.

But back then, folks in the Mahoning Valley were quite happy to see the river serve as the steel industry's sewer, as long as they had jobs.

With those jobs gone, attitudes are changing. A small coalition of activists is looking to usher in a new era for the river — opening up this section of the Mahoning for recreation while eliminating the potential health hazards in the muck. They are discussing a plan to remove an estimated 750,000 cubic yards of contaminated silt.

"The water's fine," said Bob Davic, a Mahoning River specialist with the Ohio EPA. "Just don't touch the sediment."

SEE RIVER/6-A



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The Mahoning River's tarlike sediment contains oil and chemicals suspected of causing cancer.

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## RIVER

FROM 1-A

## Mahoning is focus of cleanup hopes

Since 1988, the Ohio Department of Health has advised people to avoid contact with the 30-mile swath of the river that cuts through the region's major cities — Warren, Niles, Girard and Youngstown.

State health officials also warn against eating any of the bottom-dwelling fish from this section. Fish such as carp and channel catfish accumulate the chemicals in their fat and would pass them on if ingested.

But nowhere along this stretch of the Mahoning are signs posted warning people about the dangers of touching the sediment or eating the fish.

No programs are educating the public, including schoolchildren, about the chemical-laden sediment.

Interviews with officials and residents reflect a feeling that it's assumed that people know to stay out of the river because generations grew up with it.

"This is something the community has known for years," said Robert Hewitt, director of environmental health for the Youngstown Health District.

But such a lackadaisical attitude may pose a health risk. Contact with the sediments could increase chances of cancer, said Bob Johnson, epidemiology investigator for the Ohio Department of Health.

The sediment contains PAHs, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, and PCBs, polychlorinated biphenyls. Both are suspected of causing cancer.

The river attracts the homeless, especially transients, who often fish and bathe in the water, said Art Ort, the homeless case manager with Catholic Community Services in Youngstown.

Yet Ort, a 31-year-old Youngstown native, was unaware of the state's contact ban until informed last week by a reporter. He is sure his clients also don't know the dangers.

"I knew it was bad, and everyone knows it's bad, but not that bad," he said.

Others echoed Ort's surprise when told about it.

"I didn't know about it, and I've lived here in Warren since 1974," said Clarence Jackson, 42.

For decades, public access to the Mahoning River has been minimal. Except for four parks in Warren, this stretch of the Mahoning had been mostly out of reach and hidden for generations by the monstrous steel mills that straddled its banks.

But with many of the mill buildings now gone, it is much easier for people to come in contact with the river.

And that is producing a new attitude about the Mahoning.

Some officials and residents in Trumbull and Mahoning counties envision a river renaissance similar to what has happened with Cleveland and the Cuyahoga River. They see a network



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The second annual Mahoning RiverFest in Warren gave canoe instructor Gary Nims a chance to introduce people to the Mahoning River, one of the state's most polluted rivers. It's burdened by contaminated silts that could be removed under a proposed cleanup plan.

of trails snaking from Ashtabula through the valley.

Warren opened its first riverfront trail two years ago. More are planned.

"We have an opportunity here we did not have in the past," said Alexander T. Bobersky, an urban design planner with Warren.

The 30 miles of river have tree-lined banks — rare in an urban setting. The river is emerging as a natural resource and a recreational source, with communities that once fought over tax dollars now cooperating on redevelopment.

"It took us 20 years to get this new attitude," said Daniel C. Manula, mayor of Struthers. "It was jobs at all cost. Now the environment has a place in the mix and should be protected."

Leading this rebirth is a plan to remove the polluted sediment. An initial study by the Army Corps of Engineers done two years ago estimated the river's polluted soils could be dredged and the bank and river bottom restored for \$91.5 million. The communities are trying to raise their \$1.5 million share of the study's next phase.

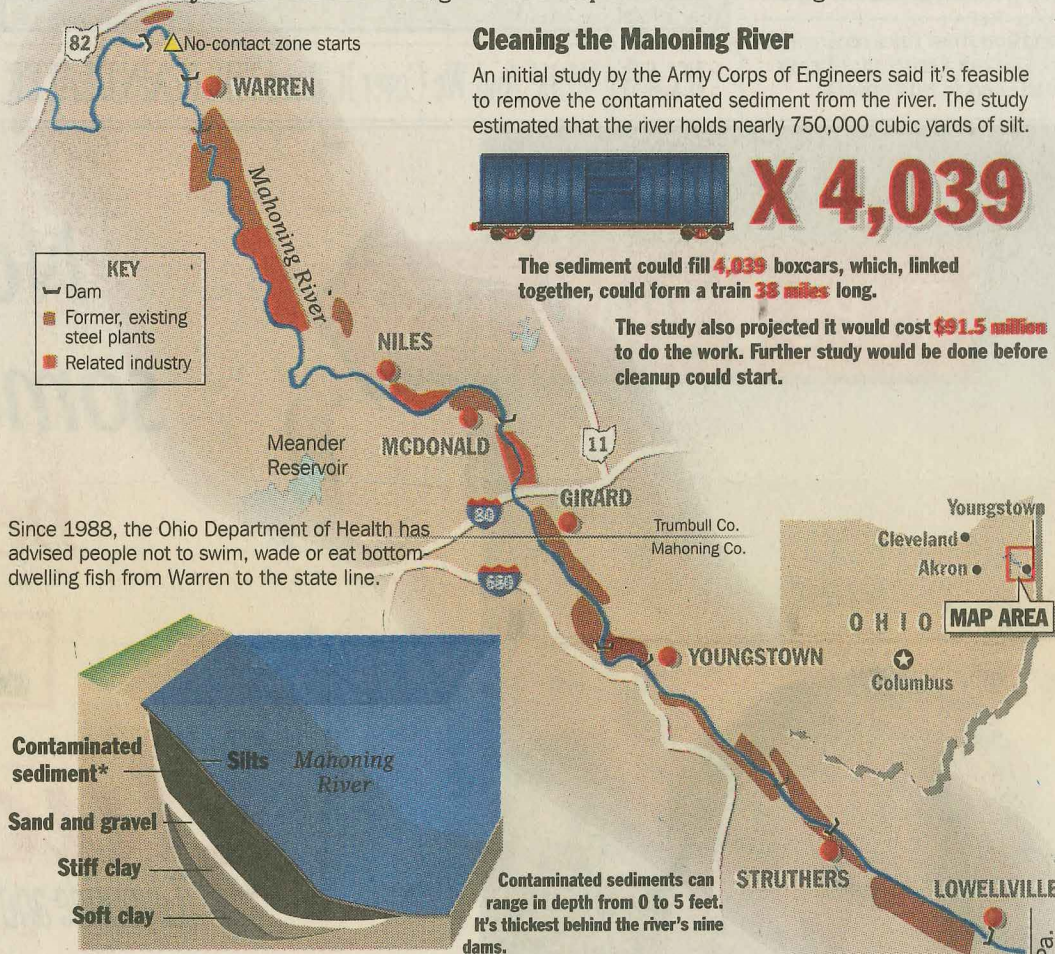
That study will take about two years and recommend how to proceed with cleanup, which is at least five years away, said Jeff Benedict, the project manager for the Corps of Engineers.

"There is a reawakening going on," said Jim Villani, owner of Pig Iron Press, a literary publishing house in Youngstown, which plans to release a book on the river, "Reflections on the Mahoning."

"But it's not truly public yet. We have a lot of educating to do to let the community see that the river is still important, even if we are not an industrial center anymore."

## The polluted Mahoning River

The steel mills, railroads and related industries that hugged the Mahoning River from Warren southeast to the state line have left a dangerous mess. Now the sediment in this 30-mile stretch of the river is laced with a smelly, tar-like mixture of oil, grease and suspected cancer-causing chemicals.



That is the aim of the Mahoning River Consortium, which is dedicated to restoring the river and supports the dredging.

On Sept. 30, the group hosted its second annual Mahoning RiverFest in Warren's riverfront Packard Park. Hundreds of people wandered among displays and activities relating to the river and its recreation potential.

"We're trying to redefine what the Mahoning River means to our community," said Kim Mascarella, the group's executive director.

Once, the river meant steel mills, railroads and related industry. Between 1920 and 1970, the river served 15 primary plants and 35 related industrial plants, according to the corps' study.

The mills needed water to cool machinery. To do that, they would suck up the water and

He dipped a 7-foot pole into the water and scooped a mug of black goo off the bottom.

"That's the problem," Schroeder said, as he plopped the pungent gunk on the dock. "If we want to clean up the river, we have to get rid of that."

Schroeder also pointed out the blue oil sheen that came up when he disturbed the sediment. Here, the contamination goes down about 3 feet. It's about 4 feet deeper on the east bank.

Just north of the park was the U.S. Steel Ohio Works, which is now gone.

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civil and environmental engineering at Youngstown State, surveyed the sediments along the river as part of the Corps of Engineers study. (He and his students took a 40-hour health and safety training program so they would know how to deal with hazardous substances.)

The sediment is not considered a hazardous waste because chemical concentrations are below federal standards, according to the report. But special precautions will be needed to dispose of it.

Steel from these plants was used in battleships, tanks and arms in World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam War.

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It's common to see an oil sheen on this 30-mile section of the river when sediment on the river's bottom is disturbed.

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The mills needed water to cool machinery. To do that, they would suck up the water and then return it, processing as much as five times the river's volume daily.

Water came back too hot for fish and other aquatic life to live. For example, the water temperature exceeded 95 degrees for more than 90 days in 1964, according to the corps study.

Water also carried away the plant's pollutants and wastes from the area's sewage treatment plants, which did not fully remove contaminants.

"It was probably the most intensely used river in the world," said Loren Schroeder, emeritus professor of biology at Youngstown State University, who has studied it since 1968.

At the 10-year-old B&O Spring Common Park in downtown Youngstown, the only park on the river in Mahoning County, Schroeder demonstrated how the contamination remains locked in the sediment.

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"The expectations were that if you shut off the pollution, the river would recover, and the sediments would be buried or flushed out," Schroeder said. "The pollution has reduced for 15 years, but the sediment level has not changed."

The EPA's Davic said, "When you look at it, it's a beautiful river. But what people don't understand is under that beauty is toxic pollutants in the sediments."

Scott C. Martin, professor of

civil and environmental engineering at Youngstown State, surveyed the sediments along the river as part of the Corps of Engineers study. (He and his students took a 40-hour health and safety training program so they would know how to deal with hazardous substances.)

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The RiverFest was an attempt to show what the future could be, although scant mention was made of the sediment's hazards.

Many people went on canoe rides that day.

Eleven-year-old Trillion McCarty had fun, she said, and would like to canoe on the Mahoning River again.

For her mother, Nora, it was the experience of a lifetime. While the Warren mother had canoed elsewhere, it was the first time in her 43 years she had ever been in a canoe on the Mahoning.

"It's always been something to stay away from," she said. "I wasn't afraid of it. I wish they would clean it up."

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